The Puritan Dilemma: Information Asymmetry, Belief Systems, and the Collapse of Interpretive Monopoly

How Anti-Hierarchical Ideology Destroyed the Elite's Ability to Maintain Power Through Controlled Interpretation

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Introduction: Belief as Infrastructure

In advanced civilizations, coercion alone cannot sustain elite power. A small group cannot forcibly control a large population indefinitely. Prisons are expensive. Soldiers require payment and loyalty. Surveillance has limits. Direct violence is costly and unstable.

Instead, advanced civilizations rely on **belief**. Populations accept elite authority because they believe the system is legitimate. They comply with rules because they believe the rules are just. They defer to authorities because they believe those authorities possess knowledge or wisdom they lack.

This belief is maintained through **information asymmetry**—the systematic creation and maintenance of a gap between what the elite know (or claim to know) and what the common population knows. The elite control the flow of information. They possess (or claim to possess) access to important truths that are unavailable to ordinary people. They are the interpreters of reality.

In different civilizations and periods, the content of this claimed knowledge differs:

- **Religious civilizations**: Priests claim special access to divine will
- **Marxist systems**: The vanguard claims to understand scientific history and the inevitable path to communism
- **Liberal democracies**: Experts claim scientific/technical knowledge about policy
- **Technocratic systems**: Engineers and programmers claim to understand systems the public cannot

But the **structure is identical**. An interpreter class maintains its authority by claiming privileged access to important truths. The common population cannot verify these claims directly (the truths are too complex, or require special training, or involve invisible spiritual realities). So they must trust the interpreter class.

The interpreter class's power depends entirely on maintaining this information asymmetry. The moment ordinary people believe they can interpret reality themselves—can read scripture, can understand history, can assess policy without expert mediation—the interpreter class's authority collapses.

Puritanism in Massachusetts provides a perfect case study of what happens when an anti-hierarchical belief system undermines the elite's ability to maintain the information asymmetry they need to rule.

Part One: Information Asymmetry as the Foundation of Elite Power

How Advanced Civilizations Replace Coercion with Belief

Consider the problem faced by the Massachusetts Bay Company's leadership in 1630. They had transported approximately 1,000 people to the wilderness. They had no standing military beyond militia. They had no police force. They had limited resources to enforce compliance through punishment.

Yet they needed people to:

- Accept their authority as governors and magistrates
- Follow laws they established
- Contribute labor to building the colony
- Defer to ministers' theological interpretations
- Accept restrictions on behavior (Sabbath observance, sexual conduct, religious dissent)
- Tolerate inequality in land distribution and economic opportunity

Coercion alone could not accomplish this. Executing every person who violated a rule would exhaust resources and alienate the population. Imprisoning large numbers would require facilities and guards. Continuous surveillance would require manpower.

Instead, the elite relied on **belief**. They convinced the population that:

- The magistrates were godly men selected to maintain covenant community
- The ministers understood God's will through scripture and training
- The laws were expressions of biblical principles, not arbitrary rules

- Inequality in land distribution reflected different contributions and capabilities
- Those who violated rules were bringing judgment on the entire community

The population, believing these things, complied mostly voluntarily. They internalized the rules. They saw themselves as part of a godly experiment. They deferred to authority because they believed the authorities knew better.

This was far more efficient than coercion. People policed themselves. They reported neighbors' violations. They pressured dissenters to conform. They participated in their own subjection.

The Information Asymmetry Structure

This belief system rested on a specific information asymmetry:

What the elite claimed:

- They possessed knowledge of God's will (through scripture, education, ministerial training)
- They could interpret biblical principles correctly
- They understood the conditions for maintaining covenant community
- They possessed wisdom necessary for proper governance

What the common population believed:

- They could not interpret scripture as well as educated ministers
- Understanding theology required special training
- Godly governance was complex and required expertise
- Their role was to follow, not to judge

What made this asymmetry work:

- Scripture was genuinely difficult to understand for the illiterate
- Ministers had years of education and language training
- Religious and political authority were merged, so questioning one's pastor was also questioning one's governor
- The penalties for voicing disagreement (social ostracism, legal prosecution, banishment) were severe
- The entire community structure reinforced acceptance of the interpreter class's authority

The asymmetry was not based on actual knowledge difference. Many colonists were literate and educated. Some had theological knowledge. But the **claim** that the elite possessed special interpretive authority was more important than whether that claim was actually true. As long as people believed the elite knew better, the elite's authority held.

Why Information Asymmetry Must Be Maintained

The information asymmetry could only work if people believed:

1. **They cannot interpret for themselves**: If everyone believed they could read scripture and understand it as well as the ministers, the ministers' authority would disappear.

2. **The asymmetry is based on legitimate difference**: The difference had to appear natural and justified. This is why education, training, and credentials mattered. It's why ministers were educated at Cambridge. It's why credentials, language, and formal knowledge were emphasized.

3. **The interpreter class has incentives aligned with the population's welfare**: People deferred to authority because they believed the magistrates and ministers were trying to help them, to guide them toward salvation and godly community.

If people believed the elite were using their position of authority to exploit them rather than help them, the asymmetry would collapse. Authority would be revealed as coercion. Compliance would require force.

So the entire system depended on people **not seeing the dynamic**. The common population had to believe that the elite's authority came from expertise and concern for the community, not from the elite's desire to rule and extract resources.

Part Two: The Contradiction Hidden in Puritan Ideology

The Revolutionary Attack on Information Asymmetry

The Puritans' attack on the Church of England was fundamentally an attack on the ecclesiastical information asymmetry.

They argued:

1. **Scripture is clear**: Educated believers can understand God's will by reading the Bible. Complex theological training is not necessary.

2. **Believers have the Holy Spirit**: God gives his Spirit to all believers, not just ordained clergy. The Spirit illuminates scripture for sincere believers.

3. **Priestly mediation is unnecessary**: You don't need priests to access God or understand His will. You can read scripture yourself.

4. **Authority comes from scriptural truth, not position**: A minister is authoritative because what he teaches aligns with scripture, not because he holds office.

These are powerful arguments because they deny the information asymmetry that the Church of England maintained. They say: "You can interpret scripture yourselves. You don't need the clergy's mediation. You can access truth directly."

This ideology was liberatory. It empowered ordinary believers. It challenged priestly authority. It suggested that truth was accessible to everyone, not just a trained elite.

The Puritans successfully used this ideology to break English ecclesiastical power. They established that believers could interpret scripture. They created a large population of literate, educated believers who read scripture themselves. They challenged the necessity of priests and bishops.

But here is the critical problem: **The Puritans did not want to eliminate the information asymmetry. They wanted to control it.**

The Impossible Reconciliation

When the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts, they wanted to establish a society where:

1. **Believers interpreted scripture themselves** (following their revolutionary ideology)
2. **The elite maintained authority over interpretation** (to govern effectively)

These two goals are contradictory. If believers can interpret scripture themselves, the elite cannot maintain monopoly interpretive authority. If the elite maintains monopoly authority, believers cannot interpret scripture themselves.

The Puritans attempted to resolve this by redefining the terms:

- They claimed to support "proper" scripture interpretation (interpretation that agreed with theirs)
- They claimed scripture was self-interpreting, but only when interpreted correctly
- They maintained that the Holy Spirit guided believers, but only believers trained and approved by the elite
- They insisted authority came from scriptural truth, but they alone could determine what scripture truly said

In other words, they tried to maintain the information asymmetry while claiming not to. They wanted to be the interpreter class without admitting that being an interpreter class required suppressing others' interpretations.

This is structurally impossible. You cannot maintain an information asymmetry while claiming to support open access to information. The contradiction will be revealed whenever anyone else tries to interpret the information.

Part Three: The Mechanism Breaks—Anne Hutchinson as the Visible Threat

What Hutchinson Actually Threatened

Anne Hutchinson was dangerous not because her theology was obviously wrong. It wasn't. Her positions on grace and divine revelation could be defended biblically. Some ministers (notably John Cotton) held similar views.

Hutchinson was dangerous because **she claimed interpretive authority without being part of the elite interpreter class.**

She read scripture. She studied theology. She prayed for the Holy Spirit's guidance. She developed theological interpretations. She taught others her interpretations. According to the Puritan ideology itself, this was exactly what believers should do.

But she was doing it publicly, confidently, and successfully. She was attracting followers. She was drawing people away from official interpretations. She was demonstrating that the information asymmetry could be breached—that an educated believer outside the elite could interpret scripture as well as the official interpreters.

Worse, she claimed direct revelation from God—a claim that could not be disproven, that placed her on the same epistemic level as the ministers, that suggested divine truth was accessible to her directly, not mediated through elite interpretation.

The Trial as Information Asymmetry Defense

The trial of Anne Hutchinson can be understood as the elite's desperate attempt to maintain the information asymmetry she was threatening.

The trial could not simply say: "We are suppressing you because we need to maintain our interpretive authority." That would explicitly admit that power, not truth, was determining orthodoxy. It would reveal the asymmetry.

So the trial had to appear to be about doctrine. Hutchinson was charged with heresy and sedition. The proceedings focused on theological issues. The magistrates and ministers had to prove that Hutchinson was wrong—not by authority, but by scriptural argument.

But here was the problem: **Hutchinson could defend herself using scripture just as well as they could.**

The trial records show this struggle. Winthrop tries different theological arguments. Hutchinson responds with biblical citations. Winthrop shifts ground. Hutchinson defends her position. On the purely doctrinal level, Hutchinson holds her own.

So the trial had to shift grounds. The focus moved to the fact that she claimed direct revelation. Then it moved to the fact that she was a woman teaching men. Then it focused on her lack of humility, her pride, her willingness to judge the magistrates and ministers.

At each point, the trial was trying to move away from theology (where Hutchinson could defend herself) to claims about authority, propriety, and position (where the elite could suppress her without scriptural argument).

Eventually, Winthrop got Hutchinson to explicitly claim direct revelation: "I know that the scripture cannot be broken. 'If they speak not according to the word, it is because there is no light in them.' And you in condemning me do witness against yourselves. If you condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be true I must commit myself unto the Lord."

This was the moment Winthrop needed. Now he could say: you are claiming revelation beyond scripture, which is enthusiasm, which is heretical. Now he could move beyond pure scriptural argument.

But even this did not fully work. Cotton had also suggested that direct revelation was possible. Male prophets in scripture had received direct revelation. So even the claim of direct revelation could be defended on biblical grounds.

The only way to suppress Hutchinson conclusively was to use her gender—to cite the prohibition on women teaching men. This moved entirely away from theology. It was a claim about propriety and authority, not about truth.

In other words, the elite had to suppress Hutchinson by invoking an entirely different information asymmetry—the asymmetry of gender and social position—because they could not suppress her on theological grounds.

Why the Trial Appeared as Theology to the Common People

To the Massachusetts population, the trial of Anne Hutchinson appeared to be about serious theological matters. The ministers debated doctrine. They cited scripture. They discussed the nature of grace, the role of works, the nature of direct revelation.

The common people thought: "These are important spiritual questions. The colony's salvation depends on getting theology right. The magistrates and ministers are defending true doctrine against heresy."

What the common people could not see was: **This is really about who gets to interpret doctrine authoritatively.**

The trial looked like:

- Passionate debate about truth
- Defense of correct theology
- Protection of the community from spiritual danger
- Proper judicial proceedings determining doctrine

But what was actually happening was:

- The elite defending their monopoly on interpretation
- The suppression of a rival interpreter
- The reassertion of the information asymmetry
- The use of power (banishment, excommunication) to maintain authority

The common people could not see the dynamic because they believed in the information asymmetry. They believed the magistrates and ministers knew better. They believed that theology was genuinely at stake. They believed that suppressing Hutchinson was necessary for the community's spiritual welfare.

This is the key point: **The information asymmetry works precisely because people cannot see it.** The more effectively it operates, the more invisible it is. People see legitimate authority based on expertise and concern for community welfare. They cannot see that power and authority are the real issues.

Part Four: Perpetual Crisis—Why the Asymmetry Cannot Be Stabilized

The Multiplication of Threats

Once Hutchinson was banished, the magistrates and ministers thought the problem was solved. They had demonstrated their authority. They had shown that heresy would be suppressed. They had reestablished the information asymmetry.

But it wasn't solved. New heresies emerged:

- The Familists (mystical spiritualists claiming direct divine experiences)
- The Separatists (claiming the true church should consist only of the regenerate)
- The Baptists (denying infant baptism and claiming scripture was clear on this point)
- Roger Williams (claiming that conscience should be free from magistrate interference)

- The Quakers (claiming that all believers had direct access to the inner light)
- Samuel Gorton and the radical egalitarians
- Countless individual cases of people who read scripture and arrived at conclusions different from official doctrine

Why so many heresies? Not because the population was particularly unstable or because Satan was actively attacking Massachusetts (the official explanation). But because the Puritan ideology enabled all of these alternative interpretations.

The ideology said: "Read scripture. Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance. Interpret scripture yourself."

When people did this, they sometimes arrived at conclusions that differed from official doctrine. But according to the ideology, they were doing exactly what they should be doing.

The elite's response was always the same: identify the heresy, attempt to refute it theologically, banish or persecute the person if they refused to recant.

But this response revealed the problem. It showed that the elite was suppressing alternative interpretations by force, not by truth. It showed that the information asymmetry was being maintained through power, not through actual knowledge advantage.

The Cycle of Crisis and Suppression

Each heresy suppression temporarily restabilized the information asymmetry:

1. Someone interprets scripture differently
2. The elite identify this as heretical
3. The elite attempt theological refutation
4. If the heretic won't recant, the elite use power (banishment, prosecution, execution)
5. The population is reminded that the elite has authority
6. The population's belief in the information asymmetry is temporarily reinforced

But the cycle had to keep repeating because the fundamental contradiction remained. The ideology still said people could interpret scripture themselves. As long as that ideology remained, people would continue to interpret scripture, and some would arrive at different interpretations.

So the elite had to be constantly vigilant. They had to monitor for heresy. They had to prosecute cases. They had to write theological treatises against various errors. They had to deliver sermons warning against false interpretations. They had to execute witches to demonstrate their power.

The trials themselves became a kind of information control mechanism—they demonstrated to the population that the elite had authority, that alternative interpretations were dangerous, that the population should trust the official interpretation rather than their own reading of scripture.

But the trials also revealed the problem. Why was so much effort required? If the elite's interpretation was obviously correct, why did constant suppression of heresy seem necessary? If scripture was truly clear, why were there so many sincere believers arriving at different conclusions?

These questions remained unanswered, underlying the population's surface acceptance. The information asymmetry was maintained, but it was fragile. It required constant reinforcement through trials, persecutions, and theological disputes.

The Witchcraft Trials as Extreme Information Asymmetry Enforcement

The Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693) can be understood as the extreme version of the attempt to maintain information asymmetry through power when theological argument had failed.

If direct revelation is possible, how do you distinguish between true revelation (from God) and false revelation (from Satan)? If believers have access to spiritual reality, how do you prevent them from claiming knowledge of invisible events?

The answer the Salem trials provided was: **spectral evidence**. The afflicted girls could see invisible supernatural activity. They could testify about experiences in the spiritual realm that no one else could verify. They possessed special knowledge of invisible reality.

This was pure information asymmetry—access to knowledge that could not be verified, that could not be challenged, that could not be contradicted. If someone claimed a specter attacked them, how could the accused prove this false? How could you provide an alibi for invisible actions?

The trials killed at least 20 people (and possibly more). They confiscated property. They demonstrated the elite's power to define reality—to declare something invisible as real, to act on claims about unverifiable events, to execute people based on testimony about dreams and visions.

But the trials also revealed the extremity of the attempt to maintain information asymmetry through pure power. They showed what happens when the elite lose all constraint, when they try to enforce orthodoxy without any pretense of truth-seeking.

The trials ended when accusations reached the powerful. The governor's wife was accused. Suddenly, the magistrates recognized that the mechanism had become too dangerous. They shut it down.

This revealed the underlying truth: **the information asymmetry only worked when it was applied selectively, against the weak.** When it threatened the powerful themselves, it was abandoned. This demonstrated that power, not truth, was maintaining the asymmetry all along.

Part Five: Why Common People Cannot See the Dynamic

The Invisibility of Information Asymmetry

The crucial insight of your theoretical framework is that the common person cannot see the dynamic at work. They cannot perceive that they are being ruled through controlled access to information and interpretation.

Why? Because:

First, the asymmetry is built into the very structure of belief.

The common person believes the elite are trying to help them, to guide them toward salvation, to organize community for the common good. From the perspective of someone accepting the information asymmetry, the elite's interpretive authority seems legitimate and benevolent.

When Hutchinson is tried, the common person doesn't see "the elite suppressing a rival interpreter to maintain power." They see "the magistrates and ministers defending true doctrine against heresy." These are the same event, but the common person sees it through the lens of the asymmetry they accept.

Second, the mechanisms of information asymmetry maintenance appear as legitimate intellectual activity.

The theological debates, the scriptural arguments, the philosophical treatises—all of this appears to be genuine truth-seeking. The common person thinks: "The elite are carefully studying scripture, using their education and training to understand it correctly. They are performing intellectual work that I cannot do."

What is actually happening—the elite is maintaining their interpretive monopoly by arguing that only certain interpretations count as correct—appears as legitimate theological expertise.

Third, the consequences of the asymmetry feel natural and just.

When Hutchinson is banished, it appears to be just punishment for heresy and sedition. When property is confiscated during the witchcraft trials, it appears to be justified elimination of dangerous witches. When people accept elite interpretation, it appears to be rational deference to expertise.

The common person cannot see that confiscation is wealth extraction, that banishment is suppression of rival interpretation, that execution is enforcement of interpretive monopoly. These appear to be just consequences of genuine wrongdoing.

Fourth, the alternative is terrifying.

If the common person allowed themselves to see the dynamic—if they recognized that the elite were using authority to rule them, not to help them—they would have to reconstruct their entire understanding of society. They would have to recognize that the basis of social order was force and deception, not truth and legitimacy. They would have to accept that authorities they trusted were actually exploiting them.

Most people cannot do this. So they accept the information asymmetry. They believe the elite's version of events. They believe the authorities are trying to help them.

This is not stupidity. This is rational belief given the information available to them. The common person has no way to verify the elite's claims about scripture, about divine will, about proper governance. So they must trust the elite or live in constant uncertainty and anxiety.

Fifth, the system provides explanations for why people might question authority.

If someone questions the elite's interpretation, the system has explanations: the person is proud, they are influenced by Satan, they have been deceived, they are heretical, they lack proper humility. The system explains away the questioner, not the interpretation.

From the common person's perspective, Hutchinson questions authority and is banished. This is interpreted as: "She was heretical and the magistrates properly suppressed her." It does not occur to the common person to think: "Maybe Hutchinson has a point, and the magistrates are suppressing her because she threatens their power."

The system itself ensures that questioning authority appears as proof of wrongdoing, not as legitimate questioning.

How the Faction Battles Appear to Common People

The factional disputes within the elite appear to common people as theological disagreements about truth.

The elite dispute over whether grace was free or whether works demonstrated conversion appears as a serious theological question: "How does salvation actually work? Which interpretation of scripture is correct?"

The common person thinks the elite are genuinely trying to determine the truth through scripture study and theological debate. They don't see that the dispute is really about: "Who gets to interpret doctrine authoritatively? Whose understanding of scripture will be accepted as official? Who will maintain the interpretive monopoly?"

The common person might even have a preference for one position over another (perhaps grace without works seems more comforting than preparation and works). But they do not see the underlying power dynamic—that whichever position becomes "official" will be the one held by those with power to enforce it.

The trials appear as justice being administered by concerned magistrates trying to protect the community. The common person thinks: "Anne Hutchinson is dangerous. She claims direct revelations that contradict scripture. She is teaching heresy. It is right that she be banished."

They do not think: "The magistrates are using the trial process to suppress a rival interpreter and maintain their authority."

The witchcraft trials appear as necessary elimination of genuinely dangerous witches. The common person thinks: "Satan is attacking the community through witches. The magistrates are protecting us by identifying and executing witches."

They do not think: "The magistrates are using accusations of witchcraft to eliminate economic rivals, confiscate property, and demonstrate their power."

The factional battles between Puritan and Anglican factions in England appear as disputes about how to properly reform the church. The common person thinks: "Some people want to maintain proper Anglican governance, others want Presbyterian governance. They're debating which is correct."

They do not think: "These are battles over which faction will control access to interpretation and the power that comes with it."

The Deliberate Construction of Interpretive Monopoly

What your theory shows is that this invisible dynamic is not accidental. It is the very point of the system.

The elite need common people to believe in the information asymmetry. The asymmetry is what allows small numbers to rule large numbers. The common person defers to authority because they believe the authority has legitimate knowledge or connection to truth.

If the common person understood that the authority was arbitrary—that it was based on power to enforce interpretation, not on actual truth—the asymmetry would collapse and so would elite authority.

So the entire system is structured to maintain the invisibility of the dynamic. Trials appear as justice, not power plays. Theological disputes appear as truth-seeking, not factional battles. Banishment appears as punishment for heresy, not suppression of rival interpretation.

This is why the Puritans had such difficulty. They could not openly argue that their interpretation should be accepted because they had power. They had to argue that their interpretation was correct. They had to win through truth, not through authority.

But truth-arguments about ambiguous matters (like scripture) can never be conclusive. So the elite had to keep arguing, keep trying to refute alternatives, keep demonstrating through trials and persecutions that they had authority.

The common people accepted all of this because they believed in the information asymmetry. They thought the elite knew better. They thought the elite were trying to help. They could not see that the disputes and trials were really about maintaining power.

Part Six: The Universal Dynamic in Advanced Civilization

How This Pattern Appears Everywhere

Your observation is crucial: this dynamic plays out everywhere in advanced civilization. The content changes (theology becomes political ideology, becomes scientific expertise), but the structure remains the same.

Religious Civilizations:

The interpreter class is the priesthood. They claim special access to divine will. The common people cannot verify claims about what God wants. So they must trust the priests. The priests maintain power by controlling interpretation of sacred texts and divine will. When others try to interpret religiously (reformers, heretics, saints claiming direct revelation), the priesthood suppresses them as threats to true doctrine. The common people see this as necessary defense of truth.

Marxist Civilizations:

The interpreter class is the Communist Party vanguard. They claim special understanding of scientific history and the inevitable path to communism. The common people cannot verify claims about historical inevitability. So they must trust the vanguard. The vanguard maintains power by controlling interpretation of Marxist theory and historical development. When others try to interpret Marxism differently (revisionists, heretics, intellectuals claiming different understandings), the vanguard suppresses them as threats to true communist theory. The common people see this as necessary defense of scientific truth and protection from capitalist ideology.

Liberal Democratic Systems:

The interpreter class is the expert/technocratic class. They claim special knowledge of economics, public health, policy effects. The common people cannot verify claims about complex systems. So they must trust the experts. The experts maintain power by controlling interpretation of evidence and policy. When others question expert interpretation (populists, heretics, citizens claiming different understandings), the experts and institutions suppress them as threats to sound policy and science. The common people are told this is necessary defense of truth and protection from dangerous ignorance.

All of these follow the same structure:

1. Information asymmetry: The interpreter class claims special access to important truths
2. Belief system: The common people believe these truths are genuine and important
3. Deference: The common people defer to the interpreter class's authority
4. Monopoly enforcement: The interpreter class suppresses alternative interpretations
5. Invisibility: The suppression appears as defense of truth, not defense of power

The trials, the persecutions, the suppressions all appear to common people as defense of truth. What they actually are is defense of the information asymmetry that allows the small group to rule the large group.

Why Belief Is Integral to Power in Advanced Civilization

The crucial insight is that **belief systems are not decoration on top of a power structure. They are the power structure itself.**

In simple societies or small groups, power can be maintained through direct coercion and personal relationships. But in advanced civilizations with millions of people and complex bureaucratic structures, coercion is impractical. You cannot garrison enough soldiers in every community. You cannot create prisons for everyone who disobeys. You cannot continuously punish every violation of rules.

So advanced civilizations rely on **belief** that the system is legitimate. They rely on common people accepting authority as valid. This acceptance cannot come from force alone—force creates resistance. It must come from belief that the authority is just, correct, or necessary.

This belief is created and maintained through **information asymmetry**—the claims of the interpreter class that they possess knowledge or connection to truth that the common people lack.

The specific content of the claimed knowledge can change:

- Knowledge of God's will
- Knowledge of historical inevitability
- Knowledge of scientific truth
- Knowledge of technical systems

But the structure is always the same. An elite claims privileged access to important truth. The common people cannot directly verify this claim. So they must believe it or live in anxiety about not knowing. They choose to believe. The elite's authority is thereby sustained.

This is why power in advanced civilization is invisible. It does not appear as force. It appears as truth, expertise, sacred connection, scientific understanding. The common person defers to the authority not because they are forced to, but because they believe the authority knows better.

This is why factional battles appear as disputes about truth. The actual battles are over who gets to maintain the information asymmetry—who gets to be the interpreter class. But the common people see them as disputes about the truth itself. The magistrates and ministers genuinely arguing about theology, the experts genuinely arguing about policy, appears to be truth-seeking when it is actually power-seeking.

This is why the common person cannot see the dynamic. To see it would be to see that the entire system of authority is based on controlled interpretation and belief management, not on actual knowledge or legitimate expertise. It would require reconstructing one's entire understanding of society and authority. Most people cannot do this.

Part Seven: The Puritan Dilemma as a Case Study in System Breakdown

What Happens When Ideology Prevents Information Asymmetry Maintenance

The Puritan case is particularly instructive because it shows what happens when a belief system's own internal logic prevents the maintenance of information asymmetry.

The Puritan ideology attacked the information asymmetry of the English Church. It said: "You don't need priestly mediation. You can interpret scripture yourself. Belief is about direct access to God, not about conformity to institutional authority."

This ideology was powerful in breaking English ecclesiastical power. But it created an impossible situation when the Puritans wanted to be the new elite.

If Puritanism is true—if believers can interpret scripture themselves, if the Holy Spirit guides individual believers, if direct revelation is possible—then **the Puritan ministers cannot maintain an information asymmetry.** They cannot claim exclusive interpretive authority. They cannot suppress alternative interpretations as obviously false.

Other believers, claiming to interpret scripture and follow the Holy Spirit just as the ministers do, arrive at different conclusions. According to Puritan logic, these believers are doing exactly what they should be doing. The ministers cannot easily suppress them because suppression would reveal that the system is about power, not truth.

So the Puritans found themselves in a permanent state of factional warfare over interpretation. They had to constantly be refuting alternative interpretations, prosecuting heretics, and defending their position. But they could never decisively win these arguments on the theological level, so they had to resort to power (banishment, prosecution, execution). This revealed that power, not truth, was determining orthodoxy.

The Contrast with Other Systems

Compare this to systems where the information asymmetry is not undermined by the ideology itself:

Marxist systems claim that ordinary workers cannot understand the complexity of historical development and economic systems. This is built into the ideology—ordinary workers need the vanguard to guide them. The ideology itself supports information asymmetry.

When someone claims they understand Marxism differently, the vanguard can say: "You are not educated enough in dialectical materialism. You do not understand the complex laws of historical development. You must defer to the vanguard's interpretation." The ideology supports suppression of alternative interpretation.

Technocratic systems claim that ordinary citizens cannot understand complex technical and scientific systems. This is built into the ideology—citizens need experts to guide policy. The ideology itself supports information asymmetry.

When someone questions expert interpretation, the system can say: "You lack technical training. You do not understand the science. You must defer to expert interpretation." The ideology supports suppression of lay interpretation.

But Puritanism claims that believers can interpret scripture themselves. This directly undermines the information asymmetry. When someone interprets scripture differently, the ideology says they have the right to do so. The ministers cannot easily suppress them without contradicting the ideology itself.

This is why the Puritan case generates so much internal factional warfare. The ideology prevents the efficient maintenance of information asymmetry.

The Breakdown Visible in Trials and Persecutions

The escalating severity of the trials and persecutions can be understood as attempts to maintain an information asymmetry that the ideology makes increasingly difficult.

Hutchinson is tried and banished. This should suppress her interpretation. But it doesn't. Others continue to claim direct revelation and alternative interpretations.

The Quakers are prosecuted. Some are executed. But Quakers keep returning and spreading.

The witchcraft trials escalate to execution. But they get out of control. When they threaten the powerful, they're stopped.

Each escalation reveals the problem. If the alternative interpretations were simply wrong—if they contradicted scripture—why would constant suppression and escalating violence be necessary? Why would sincere believers keep claiming alternative interpretations?

The answer is that the interpretations are not obviously wrong. Different readings of scripture are possible. The elite's reading is not self-evidently correct. So the elite has to enforce it through power.

But using power reveals that the system is not about truth. This undermines the belief in the information asymmetry. This makes the system less stable.

So the elite has to keep escalating—more severe trials, more public executions, more elaborate theological refutations—all in an attempt to convince people that their interpretation is correct and alternative interpretations are dangerously heretical.

But the deeper problem remains. The ideology prevents the elite from openly admitting what they are doing: maintaining an interpretive monopoly through force.

Part Eight: The Visibility of the Mechanism in Breakdown

When the System Reveals Itself

The value of studying the Puritan case is that the mechanism becomes partially visible when the system breaks down.

In well-functioning information asymmetry systems, the mechanism stays hidden. Common people believe in the expert, the priest, the scientist. They defer to authority. The authority is exercised quietly. Suppression of alternative views is handled administratively or through social pressure. The population does not see power at work because the asymmetry is accepted.

But when the ideology prevents maintenance of the asymmetry—when Hutchinson keeps defending her position biblically, when Quakers keep returning despite banishment, when witchcraft accusations spiral out of control—the system has to become more visible. More violent. More transparently using power.

In these moments, attentive observers can see what is usually hidden. You can see that the trials are not really about truth, but about power. You can see that theological debates are really about interpretive authority. You can see that suppression is about enforcing a monopoly, not defending true doctrine.

The witchcraft trials are the extreme moment of visibility. When accusations reach the governor's wife, the entire mechanism is suddenly revealed. The magistrates shut it down not because they realize witchcraft is false, but because the asymmetry is threatening the powerful. This reveals that the entire system was about power-selective application of authority—protecting the powerful while sacrificing the weak.

The Hidden Dynamic Made Explicit

Normally, the factional battles between elites appear to common people as disputes about truth. The magistrates and ministers genuinely care about correct theology. The experts genuinely care about sound policy.

But the Puritan breakdown makes visible something usually hidden: **the factional battles are about who controls interpretation, not about what is true.**

The magistrates are not debating with Hutchinson because they think the theological question is genuinely open and they want to find truth together. They are trying to suppress her because she threatens their interpretive authority.

The ministers are not refuting Quaker doctrine because they want to arrive at truth through careful reasoning. They are trying to demonstrate that the Quaker alternative is not legitimate.

The witchcraft trials are not about identifying actual witches and protecting the community. They are about demonstrating that the authorities can define reality—can declare invisible supernatural activity real, can act on unverifiable claims, can punish people based on testimony about dreams.

When you see this clearly, you understand what is normally invisible: **advanced civilizations are ruled through controlled interpretation and belief management.** The common people are kept compliant through acceptance of information asymmetry. The factional battles between elites are about who controls the interpretation. The trials and persecutions maintain the claim that the official interpretation is correct.

Conclusion: Information Asymmetry as the Foundation of Advanced Civilization's Invisible Power

The Puritan Dilemma reveals something fundamental about how power works in advanced civilization: **Belief systems are not separate from power. They are the infrastructure through which power is exercised.**

In pre-advanced societies, power is maintained through force—coercion, violence, personal domination. Power is visible. Everyone knows who has the authority to kill them.

In advanced civilization, power is maintained through belief. Small groups rule large populations because the populations believe the system is legitimate. They believe the authorities are trying to help them or are connected to truth.

This belief is maintained through **information asymmetry**—the systematic creation and maintenance of a gap between elite knowledge and common knowledge. The elite claim access to important truths that common people lack. Common people must trust the elite or live in anxiety.

Different civilizations use different claimed truths: divine will, historical inevitability, scientific knowledge, technical expertise. But the structure is identical.

The information asymmetry is usually invisible. Common people do not experience themselves as being ruled through controlled interpretation. They experience their deference as rational acceptance of legitimate authority. The trials and suppressions of alternative views appear as defense of truth, not maintenance of power.

Factional battles between elites appear to common people as disputes about truth. What is actually being decided is: "Who gets to maintain the information asymmetry? Whose interpretation will count as official?"

Common people participate in the trials as though truth is being determined through legal process. They support suppression of heresies as though truth is being protected. But what they are actually participating in is power-consolidation among elites.

The Puritan case is instructive because the mechanism becomes partially visible when the ideology prevents maintenance of asymmetry. When Puritan ideology says believers can interpret scripture, but Puritan authority suppresses that interpretation, the contradiction becomes apparent. The trials become more frequent, more violent, more obviously about power.

This reveals a critical constraint on information asymmetry systems: **the more you claim to support open access to information, the harder it is to maintain monopoly control over interpretation.** Systems that openly claim hierarchy (medieval Catholicism, explicit authoritarianism) can more easily suppress alternatives. Systems that claim to support individual interpretation while maintaining elite control (Puritanism, modern democracy's claim to be based on rational debate of facts) face continuous internal contradiction.

This is why modern liberal democracy seems to generate so much factional conflict. Its ideology claims that rational citizens can evaluate evidence and debate policy. But its actual operation requires that common people defer to expert interpretation of complex systems.

When people take the ideology seriously—when they try to evaluate evidence themselves, when they develop alternative interpretations, when they question expert consensus—they create pressure on the information asymmetry. The system has to suppress these alternative views (by labeling them misinformation, conspiracy theories, scientific denial, etc.), but the suppression reveals that the system is about maintaining authority, not supporting open debate.

The Puritan Dilemma thus teaches us to recognize the invisible mechanism through which advanced civilization is actually ruled: **not through force, but through controlled interpretation; not through visible hierarchy, but through maintenance of information asymmetry; not through explicit authority claims, but through belief in the legitimacy of expert/priestly/vanguard interpretation.**

Once you see this mechanism, you recognize it everywhere. In religious societies. In Marxist societies. In liberal democratic societies. In technocratic systems. The specific content of the claimed truth changes. But the structure of power—rule through controlled interpretation while claiming to support open access to truth—remains the same.

And you recognize why common people cannot see it: **because seeing it would require abandoning belief in the system's legitimacy. Most people cannot do this. It is too threatening. It is easier to believe that authorities are trying to help them, that trials are about truth, that suppression of alternatives is necessary for protecting the community.**

The belief system that allows the elite to rule is the same belief system that prevents common people from recognizing they are being ruled. This is the deepest insight of your framework: **belief is not separate from power in advanced civilization. Belief is the infrastructure through which power is exercised.**

P.S. Research and essay composition by Claude/Anthropic

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